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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CASABLANCA 001333

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [SMIG](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: RED ALERT FOR MIGRANTS IN MOROCCO

REF: A) Casablanca 1310
 B) Casablanca 0818
 C) Casablanca 0634

Classified By: Principal Officer Douglas C. Greene for Reasons 1.4
(b), (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A recent spate of incidents involving Moroccan security forces and sub-Saharan migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers has stirred fear and anxiety throughout the sub-Saharan population in Morocco. On December 23, Moroccan security officials rounded up more than 200 sub-Saharans, in three Rabat neighborhoods, and reportedly transported them to the Algerian border, 50 miles from the Moroccan city of Oujda. Included in the sweep, according to UNHCR and local NGOs, were approximately 50 refugees and asylum seekers holding UNHCR identification papers. Three days later, hundreds of illegal migrants stormed the 20 foot fence surrounding the Spanish enclave of Melilla, approximately 70 miles northwest of Oujda. Moroccan state news agency reported that security forces arrested 40 sub-Saharans following the incident in Melilla. End Summary.

The Rabat Roundup

¶2. (C) According to Emmanuel Mbolela, president of the Congolese Association for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Morocco (ARCOM), police entered the homes of refugees and asylum seekers in the pre-dawn hours of December 23 and, ignoring their official UNHCR identification papers, apprehended approximately 50 people. As evidence of their claim, ARCOM provided post with a list of names and UNHCR identification numbers of those who, they say, the security forces "kidnapped." In addition, newspaper reports claim that police captured 200 sub-Saharans, presumably both recognized and clandestine. By contrast, a Moroccan police contact told RSO that security forces rounded up approximately 230 clandestine sub-Saharan migrants, who had been living illegally in Rabat for more than 6 months, and transported them to the Algerian frontier. Authorities claim to have taken no one with UNHCR identification.

¶3. (C) While it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of people gathered up, it appears that a significant percentage of them were holding UNHCR identification papers. Anne Triboulet, acting office director for UNHCR, estimates Moroccan security forces took between 40-50 UNHCR recognized refugees and asylum seekers from their homes in Rabat and transported them to the frontier. Triboulet told Poloff, from what she can ascertain, 200-400 sub-Saharans were taken into custody, herded onto six busses, and dropped off in the desert near the Algerian border.

14. (C) Triboulet said that some of the refugees and asylum seekers have made their way from the dumping point to Oujda and are staying in contact with UNHCR by cell phone and through local NGOs. The GOM has forbidden UNHCR representatives to travel to Oujda to check on the state of the refugees and asylum seekers. Triboulet acknowledges that forged documents are a problem for the authorities in these types of situations. She confirmed that she has offered her assistance to the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) to help identify those sub-Saharaners in the group who UNHCR has already recognized as legitimate. According to Triboulet, there has not yet been a response to her offer from the MOI.

15. (C) At this point, Triboulet is worried about the health and welfare of UNHCR's people of concern. The temperatures in Oujda are dipping to the low 40s and the migrants are ill prepared for the cold. In addition, an NGO, Refugees Without Borders (R.S.F.), reported that there are four ill women and six women with small children hiding out near Oujda. R.S.F. claims women and children are part of the group who was forcibly removed from their homes in Rabat and dumped at the frontier. Triboulet assures us that Doctors Without Borders and the French Church of Morocco are tending to the refugees and asylum seekers in the area. She reported that there does not seem to be anyone in need of immediate medical attention at the moment. This situation, however, could change dramatically overnight as forecasts predict temperatures will drop to the 30s in the next week.

Fear and Loathing in Rabat

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16. (C) Word of the captures spread quickly through the refugee community. Within hours of the early morning raid, the two leading NGOs representing refugees and asylum seekers in Morocco, ARCOM and R.S.F., were circulating emails about the roundup. The emails warned all migrants to be on "red alert." Moreover, ARCOM almost immediately called for a protest march to demonstrate solidarity. Rumors of more raids in two other Rabat neighborhoods, however, quieted the calls for a demonstration but the option was left open for a "public meeting or protest in the future." It is clear that tempers are flaring and a sense of panic is on the rise in Rabat's migrant community.

The Storming After the Storm

17. (C) Three days after the Rabat raids, hundreds of illegal sub-Saharaners stormed the 20-foot fence surrounding the Spanish enclave of Melilla, less than 70 miles from Oujda. The Moroccan state news agency reported that three waves of migrants stormed the fence, which resulted in the arrests of 40 sub-Saharaners. The assaults were reminiscent of a series of attacks that occurred in October 2005, which led to the deaths of 16 people.

18. (C) According to NGOs and UNHCR, as many as 10,000 illegal migrants are currently hiding out in the forests surrounding Melilla and Sebta, the other Spanish enclave on Morocco's Mediterranean coast. These numbers are roughly the same as they were last year when migrants stormed the fences surrounding both cities in a weeklong string of assaults. This year, like last year, worsening weather conditions and lack of water and firewood may have had a hand in prompting the assault. There are those, also, who believe the recent push in Rabat to clear out the illegals may have added to the migrants' sense of desperation, giving them the added incentive needed to launch the attack.

Comment

19. (C) Comment: With the EU's southern flank tightening up and increased naval patrols in the waters off the Canary Islands, thousands of potential refugees, asylum seekers, and illegal migrants fleeing political violence and poverty are being stranded in Morocco, awaiting the opportunity to slip into the EU. Morocco is caught in the difficult situation of balancing domestic security with fulfilling its international obligations to protect legitimate refugees and asylum seekers. Part of this dilemma, however, could be resolved were Morocco to officially recognize UNHCR's mission and accept its proposal to establish a joint registration process for legitimate refugees and asylum seekers. End Comment.

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